

Traditional African Religion as a Neglected Form of Monotheism

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ABSTRACT

Our aims are to articulate some core philosophical positions characteristic of Traditional African Religion and to argue that they merit consideration as monotheist rivals to standard interpretations of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition. In particular, we address the topics of how God’s nature is conceived, how God’s will is meant to bear on human decision making, where one continues to exist upon the death of one’s body, and how long one is able to exist without a body. For each of these topics, we note how Traditional African Religion posits claims that clash with mainstream Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and that, being *prima facie* plausible, indicate the need for systematic cross-cultural philosophical debate.

[A] distinctive picture of African religions emerges that will have to be deeply pondered in any study of the religions of the world When African philosophy ceases to be a curiosity in those parts [the West—ed.], the philosophy of religion will be one of the most fruitful areas of intercultural conversation.

—Kwasi Wiredu, “African Religions from a Philosophical Point of View” (Wiredu 2010)

1. INTRODUCING TRADITIONAL AFRICAN RELIGION

It is clear that African philosophy is somewhat less of a mere curiosity among western philosophers than when Kwasi Wiredu commented a bit more than a decade ago. In particular, essays on sub-Saharan moral and political philosophy are now visible in international books and journals.¹ However, African philosophy of religion remains off the radar as a source of ideas that might give those in the West pause. Indeed, it simply remains largely unknown beyond the continent. If you were to ask pretty much any western philosopher of religion to enumerate the major monotheist faiths, she would mention Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and leave it at that. Indeed, in some circles the word “monotheism” might even by definition connote a theology focused on these three Abrahamic faiths. However, there is another major religion that is sensibly labeled “monotheist” for positing a single, imperceptible,

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personal God who is the creator of the universe. Its adherents and expositors have tended to call it “Traditional African Religion” (as do we in this article²) to capture the indigenous religious beliefs of many black peoples of the sub-Saharan region.

Our principal aims are to expound some of the major philosophical tenets of Traditional African Religion, which continues to be accepted by hundreds of millions of people in Africa, and to argue that they compete with, and are comparable in plausibility to, standard interpretations of the Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition. By “comparable” we do not mean better; we are not out to try to convince readers that Traditional African Religion is philosophically more sound than other forms of monotheism. Instead, we note that many of its central claims pertaining to epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics differ from them, and contend that they merit serious consideration as rivals to them from philosophers of religion around the world, which they have not received up to now.³

In undertaking this project, we often make some large generalizations so as to facilitate intercultural philosophical and theological debate. For example, we tend to ascribe certain views to holders of the Abrahamic faiths, not distinguishing between, say, Christianity and Islam, let alone variants of each one. In addition, we disregard species of Traditional African Religion, focusing on generic views that have been broadly shared across the continent. When writing on Africa, one is expected to try to avoid stereotyping by acknowledging the existence of variety and particularity amongst its 54 countries and its thousands of linguistic and ethnic groups. However, there appears to be enough common ground among sub-Saharan black peoples for many African philosophers and social scientists to speak of an overarching belief system.

Note that we are not aiming to be comprehensive in our analysis of Traditional African Religion, instead addressing claims that we find particularly philosophically interesting and promising, setting aside some others that we do not.⁴ Finally, we ignore historical matters, in favour of focusing strictly on philosophical ones. So, for example, some readers might wonder whether African peoples created the idea of a single God on their own, and, if so, whether they predated the Israelites who are normally credited with having originated the doctrine of monotheism. We do not have firm answers to these and related empirical questions, and find it unnecessary to answer them in order to achieve our aim here of engaging in intercultural philosophy of religion.

In the following, we address philosophical claims standardly held by exponents of Traditional African Religion pertaining to how God’s nature is conceived (section 2), how God’s will is meant to bear on human decision making (section 3), where one continues to exist upon the death of one’s body (section 4), and how long one is able to exist without a body (section 5). For each of these topics, we note how Traditional African Religion posits claims that are at odds with mainstream Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and that, we argue, are not to be dismissed. Although the influential Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu in the epigraph above hopes that African philosophy would be taken more seriously, which would then lead to intercultural religious debate, we hope that the intercultural religious debate in the following pages will help lead to African ontology, epistemology, and axiology being taken more seriously. We conclude by noting some respects in which differences of

religious belief, addressed in the body of this essay, entail divergent religious practices (section 6).

2. THE NATURE OF GOD

John Mbiti, the Kenyan magisterial historian of indigenous African religious thought and philosophy, surveyed nearly 300 different peoples in the sub-Saharan region and found that they all believed in God (Mbiti 1990, 29; see also Paris [1995, 28]; Lugira [2009, 40]). Although exceptions are naturally to be expected on the large continent,⁵ there is substantial consensus that God exists and, in addition, there is widespread agreement about God's nature. Although there are similarities with the Abrahamic God mentioned in this section, we focus more on respects in which the African God is conceived as different and not implausibly so by comparison.

For summarizing statements of the way God tends to be conceived in sub-Saharan Africa, consider: "In all the groups we have studied, the Supreme Being, God, is at the summit. He is conceived as the original source of all life and of all the resources of life . . . who covers everything he has created with his divine providence" (Mulago 1991, 130); "The Supreme Being of the African is the Creator, the source of life" (Wiredu 1998, 39); and God for Africans "is, in most cases, regarded as the maker of the world and its sustainer and ruler; the origin and giver of life" (Oladipo 2004, 357). There are three distinct ideas in these and other common construals of God in an African context.

Above all, God among indigenous African peoples is understood to be the one who has made the universe. Mbiti remarks, "First and foremost God is said to be the Creator of all things" (Mbiti 1975, 44), while another commentator echoes the point with the claim that "all African peoples believe that power of creation is the foremost attribute of the Supreme Being" (Lugira 2009, 40; see also Mbiti [1990, 39–41]; Gbadegesin [1991, 88]; Gyekye [1995, 70]; Magesa [1997, 39, 44]). A survey of the names ascribed to God by African peoples reveals that "creator" and, second in line, "the greatest"—the one whose power is so strong as to have fashioned everything else—are particularly common (Lugira 2009, 43–45). Although many sub-Saharans do believe in subdivinities or lesser gods, they are invariably understood to have been creations of the one Supreme Being (Mbiti 1990, 36; Gbadegesin 1991, 85–91; Gyekye 1995, 71–72, 196–97; Paris 1995, 28–30; Onah 2012).

Second, God is understood to be the one who continues to sustain what has been created and who is responsible for its continued functioning (Mbiti 1975, 44–45; 1990, 29, 41–43; Gyekye 1995, 72–73; Magesa 1997, 39; Lugira 2009, 40). Although a deist conception of creation, whereby God created the world but did not after that intervene in it, is logically possible, it is not the characteristically African view. Instead, God is understood to be one who minds what was created, with one example being that God is often understood to evince a punitive attitude and hence is labeled a "ruler," "judge," or "moral guardian" (Mbiti 1975, 46; 1990, 37, 46; Magesa 1997, 44–46).

Third, God is at other times construed as exhibiting a caring or nurturing disposition, with talk of "providence" or being a "provider" being even more common. God is understood to be not merely the source of all life, as per the general characterizations

of God above, but also someone who continues to meet the needs of living beings (Gbadegesin 1991, 88; Mulago 1991, 126, 130; Magesa 1997, 39; Lugira 2009, 41; Mungwini 2019, 81). Relatedly, God is sometimes construed as the source of all good (with any evil coming from certain creatures, on which see Gyekye [1995, 123–28, 200–201]), where the ultimate intrinsic value is vital force or life force, an imperceptible energy that is traditionally thought to permeate all concrete objects in the world to varying degrees and complexities and to have come from God (Mbiti 1975, esp. 49; Magesa 1997, esp. 41, 45; Imafidon 2013, 38–39; Molefe 2015a, 2015b; Etieyibo 2017).

All three traits, viz., of creator, sustainer, and provider, are routinely captured by a parental metaphor. That is, it is common for African peoples to think of God as the ultimate father or mother (Mbiti 1975, 47; 1990, 48–49; Mulago 1991, 130; Dzobo 1992a, 133; Paris 1995, 31–33; Magesa 1997, 40; Onah 2012). God has created life (and everything else), God engages with living beings (and all of God's creation), and in particular God meets their needs (and otherwise keeps things in order).

All this might sound like a familiar form of Christianity, but we now note some respects in which Traditional African Religion diverges from that. For many sub-Saharan thinkers, just as parents do not create their children out of nothing, but rather out of gametes that together form an embryo that grows from nutrients, so God should not be thought as having created the perceptible universe *ex nihilo* (e.g., Wiredu 1998; 2010; Oladipo 2004, 359; Mungwini 2019, 80).⁶ Prominent instances of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam maintain that there was not always a physical world and that it first came into being as a result of God's will. In contrast, a number of African philosophers and theologians deny that. The latter maintain that God "created" the universe we perceive, not in the sense of having first brought it into existence at all, but rather in the sense of having fashioned it out of always already existing material. The conception of creating, here, is that of molding (and doing so to a physical realm that has presumably existed forever). Beyond the parental metaphor, a useful analogy is the way one may sensibly be said to "create" a statue by imparting form to matter, not by originating matter in the first place.

As Wiredu points out, following Hume, the teleological argument or argument from design for the existence of God provides no more reason to favour a creator *ex nihilo* over a creator *ex materia* (1998, 36; 2010, 41). The presence of pattern suggests a designer of pre-existing stuff to no less a degree than an originator of the stuff that has been designed. Instead, some kind of cosmological argument would have to be advanced in order to provide reason to think that there exists an originator beyond a designer.

Note, though, that we are not concerned to consider which, if any, God in fact exists, and are instead interested in exploring how to understand God's nature, regardless of whether God exists or not. While arguments for the existence of God will tend to have a bearing on what God is like, there are additional kinds of arguments that are relevant to establishing God's nature.

For example, one line of enquiry would be whether God would be a truly perfect or the greatest possible being only if God were the originator of matter and did not merely impart form to it. An adherent to one of the Abrahamic faiths would likely

contend that God would be a higher creator if God were conceived as creating matter out of nothing, as opposed to tinkering with matter that has always already existed.

The point is worth taking seriously, but so is one natural reply to it, namely, the familiar claim that creation *ex nihilo* is unintelligible and perhaps even conceptually impossible. Ascribing a perfection to God is plausibly done only when the superlative final value is comprehensible and possible, so the long-standing reply goes.⁷

The view that God's creativity, and hence omnipotence, does not extend to originating the physical universe is one respect in which Traditional African Religion differs from salient versions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. A second major difference concerns the way to conceive of God's most fundamental or unifying property. It is common in the Abrahamic faiths to think of God ultimately in terms of logos. In contrast to rationality, what stands out about the African tradition is the conception of God in terms of bios, that is, what African philosophers tend to call "life-force" but what may also be called "vitality."

Vitality, here, of course involves being alive, that is, either being a biological organism in the perceptible realm or exemplifying the right sort of (roughly, homeostatic) energy in an imperceptible realm. However, vitality includes much more than being a living individual, which could well be a binary property. In addition, it is normally understood in the African tradition as a gradient property, with God having the maximum degrees of strength, creativity, synthesis, growth, vibrancy, activity, self-motion, and reproduction.

Regarding the latter, God is naturally not conceived as reproducing in the sense of creating more Gods, but rather in the sense of being the source of more life. Traditionally speaking, more life means not merely the addition of living beings, such as plants, animals, humans, and lesser divinities (or "spirits"), but also the formation of everything in the perceptible world. All concrete objects, including all manifestations of the mineral kingdom, are normally viewed as imbued with life-force, an imperceptible, divine energy.

Even setting aside the highly contested view that the mineral kingdom is alive, it is *prima facie* plausible, we submit, to think of God's creativity and other key features as manifestations of a basic or comprehensive perfection of vitality. In addition to being alive and the source of more life, God is also routinely conceived by both African and Western theologians as being omnipotent, at least able to do anything that is logically possible (and morally permissible), which is well understood in terms of strength. Consider, too, that God is often understood to be eternal, if not also necessary, where a being that always existed in the past and will never cease to exist in the future displays superlative robustness, and would display all the more for existing in all possible worlds. Still more, God is standardly construed as utterly good, where intuitively we humans would prefer to exhibit for their own sake vitalist features such as health, creativity, self-motion, development, courage, and confidence, as opposed to disease, passivity, submission, decay, insecurity, and depression. Finally, a morally perfect person, it is reasonable to suggest, is one disposed to produce liveliness of these kinds and to reduce the corresponding disvalues (cf. the third section below), perhaps using punitive measures on occasion as necessary to achieve these ends.

The facts that various forms of vitality are intuitively good for their own sake and that vitality plausibly unifies God's uncontested features make the African theory of God's nature worth considering. Fascinating cross-cultural debate would systematically consider whether vitality or rationality is the preferable candidate.

In favor of the latter, one might suggest that the perfection of omniscience is better captured by the property of intelligence than by that of liveliness. Surely it is better to know more rather than less, where logos appears to account for that more naturally than bios.

In reply, African thinkers might borrow a leaf from Thomas Aquinas, Immanuel Kant, and contemporary perfect-being theology and suggest that God's knowledge is ultimately identical to God's power, such that for God to think something is for God to will that thing. If that were so, then, since liveliness captures power extremely well, it would thereby capture knowledge comparably.

A different strategy for African thinkers would be to deny that knowledge is a perfection. Salient features of sub-Saharan philosophy include a disinclination to prize knowledge for its own sake in the manner of Aristotle and instead a tendency to consider it of mere instrumental value (on which see Metz [2009]). Although some (more Christian influenced) exponents of Traditional African Religion ascribe omniscience to God (e.g., Mbiti 1975, 50–51; Onah 2012; but see Gyekye [1995, 70, 196]), some do not (Balogun 2018, 191–92) and could be open to suggesting that God knows all and only what is required in order to exhibit and promote liveliness. In addition, even within the western tradition, one might suggest that knowledge is of mere instrumental value for putting God in a position to judge; God could not be aware of what is deserved or mete that out without omniscience, one might contend.

3. GOD'S WILL AND HUMAN PURPOSE

For both the Abrahamic faiths and Traditional African Religion, God is a person who is responsible for having formed the perceptible world. In addition, for both forms of monotheism, God is usually understood to have created the universe with one or more ends in mind, with all parts of it designed to be disposed to realize it or them. There is, however, substantial disagreement about the way God has interacted (or at least would interact) with us in the course of promoting the end(s) for the universe. We take up that difference here, along with divergent views about what the content of God's purpose for us might be.

Standard forms of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam posit what some African philosophers of religion call a "revealed" approach to God's mind (Gyekye 1995, 135–38, 206–208; Wiredu 1996, 61–77; Oladipo 2004, 361). By that, they mean that God has communicated God's intentions and other mental states directly to human beings. Perhaps God has spoken to certain people who have thereby become prophets, or maybe God has sent us written works in the form of tablets, or it could be that God directed human authors to compose a lengthy book. According to the revealed approach of the Abrahamic faiths, if you hear the testimony of a certain human person to whom God has spoken or if you read a certain text ultimately composed by God, you can know what God's purpose for us is.

In contrast, standard forms of Traditional African Religion are “nonrevealed” for including the view that God has not conveyed his purpose directly to any human beings. “In these religions, there are no founders through whom divine truths or commands are revealed” (Oladipo 2004, 361). God is commonly said to be “too big” or “too distant” for us to be able to apprehend God’s mind, so that we require two kinds of mediators in order to grasp God’s intentions. On the one hand, God is thought to communicate directly with lesser divinities and ancestors, wise and influential members of a clan who have survived the deaths of their bodies and who continue to live on earth and guide the clan. Living in an imperceptible realm and exhibiting considerable vitality, lesser divinities and ancestors are thought to be in a position to communicate with God, such that quite often African people do not even pray directly to God, but instead address the other imperceptible agents (Oladipo 2004, 357). On the other hand, ancestors and other “spirits” do not communicate with typical human beings, or at least not routinely. Instead, a clan typically relies on a diviner who has been trained over many years to interpret messages from imperceptible agents, whether received in a dream, apprehended in a trance, or read from the throwing of bones.

Setting aside this account of how God’s will can be indirectly conveyed to us, we focus on the plausible view that human beings have no hope of God communicating directly to them. According to Mbiti, for Africans “God confronts men as the mysterious and incomprehensible, as indescribable and beyond human vocabulary. This is part of the essential nature of God” (1990, 35; see also Mbiti [1975, 53]). There are a number of different reasons that African theologians have suggested for thinking that God does not communicate with us. According to Mbiti, “It is particularly as Spirit that God is incomprehensible” (1990, 35; see also [1990, 38]), although more would have to be said on this score since, as noted above, it is routinely thought that certain human beings receive messages from ancestors who are likewise imperceptible agents. Supposing that issue could be resolved, it might be that a willingness to embrace the incomprehensibility of what is beyond the perceptible is another interesting contrast with what has been dominant among western philosophers of religion, ranging from Aquinas to Alvin Plantinga (2000).⁸

Other times the suggestion is that God does us a favor by not engaging with us since we would be overwhelmed, indeed “destroyed rather than empowered” if God were close (Paris 1995, 30). “(T)he remoteness of the supreme deity in traditional African thought symbolizes divine benevolence because human beings do not have the capacity to withstand any direct encounter with the deity” (Paris 1995, 30). Imagine a designer having made a work of art with incredibly fine and delicate threads of silk or gold—she would be wise not to touch it afterward. And note that if creation *ex materia* is the way to understand God as the source of the universe, it might be that God could not have made us any more robust.

Still other times there is the thought that God has put distance between us because we have misbehaved (Gyekye 1995, 196; Magesa 1997, 43–44; cf. Wiredu 1992, 146). Here, it would be God’s punitive orientation, and not so much God’s care, that is doing the work, although it might be suggested that the point of the

punishment is to teach us a lesson and thereby do what is likely to advance our own good.

Beyond these considerations from the literature of what could be responsible for the lack of direct communication from God to us, we submit that there are two more rationales worth addressing. First, there is the idea that God's mind would be infinite or at least so comprehensive and insightful as to make it impossible for God to share its contents with us.

One might reply that, while that might be true when it comes to descriptive matters of the nature of the universe, God could surely get normative truths across to us. It need not be difficult to tell us to honor God, love our neighbor, and related prescriptions. However, the devil is in the details (so to speak). Consider how difficult it is even for professional moral philosophers to know such things as: what to do when honoring God would seem to require disregarding those made in God's image; how much time, money, and other resources to give to others besides oneself; when the consequences are so important as to make it justifiable all things considered to infringe on a right; whether it is justifiable to kill innocent lethal threats in self-defense; why there might be a difference between personal and impersonal threats; whether one should wish for a certain kind of eternal life. The average human, with little education and a low IQ, has unrealistic hope of understanding such intricacies, and it might be that we academic philosophers are doomed as well. That is particularly true if it is important to understand all the reasons behind God's purpose for us or its full significance for the cosmos, but we submit that it is also plausibly the case simply in respect of the content of the purpose itself.

Second, consider that idea that, even if God is not "too big," God is unavoidably "too distant." Even if we could grasp the fine details of how to live so as to fulfill the purpose(s) that God has assigned to us, it might be that God does not communicate them to us because God *cannot*. As Robert Nozick has argued, although God might be able to put certain ideas into our heads, it might be impossible for us to know that they came from God. "Any particular signal announcing God's existence—writing in the sky, or a big booming voice saying he exists, or more sophisticated tricks even—could have been produced by the technology of advanced beings from another star or galaxy, and later generations would doubt it had happened anyway" (Nozick 1989, 49). If it is indeed true that we cannot "imagine how God could provide *anything* that would be a permanently convincing proof of his existence" (Nozick 1989, 51), then God could not communicate with us insofar as that involves us recognizing God's intention to convey certain ideas to us (cf. Grice 1957).

The point is not that Traditional African Religion is deist; sub-Saharan philosophers and theologians normally think that God intervenes in the world and specifically in our lives. Instead, the interesting claim is that God engages with us albeit without communicating directly to us. From a characteristically African standpoint, God is necessarily hidden, by God's nature and ours; hiddenness is perfectly consistent with theism and is in fact what one should expect if God exists, contra much western philosophy (on which see, e.g., Schellenberg [1993, 2015]). Although hiddenness does not mean atheism for the sub-Saharan religious tradition, it probably does mean that prophets or texts with a divine source are not to be expected.

Instead, evidence of God's will must be inferred from something other than God's use of language, and, if the testimony of diviners is unreliable, then we appear to have no other intellectual resources than our own systematic moral reflection (as per Gyekye [1995, 135–38, 206–208]).

In addition to differing over whether God has revealed (or even could reveal) God's will directly to us, Traditional African Religion and the Abrahamic faiths generally have different views of what God has willed (or would will) in respect of us. A prominent theme in the Abrahamic faiths is that human beings are alienated from God, with our ultimate purpose being to return to God in some way. One manifestation of this broad picture is the Christian idea of original sin, according to which human nature is tainted, requiring salvation from a messiah. That said, the idea of a messiah is also prominent in Judaism and Islam (which tends to use the word "Mahdi"), and both, like Christianity, tend to think that the point of life is to believe in God, treat those similar to God respectfully, and then enter Heaven in which the hardships of life would be redeemed as we come close to God.

Typical forms of Traditional African Religion are different. As above, it is often thought that distance between us and God cannot be overcome, except insofar as we are one of the extremely lucky few to become an ancestor (by virtue of having made a truly substantial positive difference to the lives of our families and societies). For most people, there is no hope of returning to God. Hence, it is rare for African thinkers to maintain that God's purpose for us would be to live in such a way that would enable us to return to God or that a messiah has, or would ever, come to facilitate that.

Instead, one prominent idea in Traditional African Religion is that God's purpose for us would be to live like God as much as possible and hence to foster vitality in us and those around us.⁹ As one African theologian remarks,

A person is good in so far as he or she promotes, supports or protects his or her life force and the life-force of his or her neighbours. Alternatively, a person is bad or evil in as much as he or she undermines or destroys this life-force. The quest for life and its enhancement is the most fundamental value in African religions which governs all the other values. (Kasenene 1998, 25; see also Dzobo [1992a, 128–34, 1992b]; Bujo [2005, 424, 428]; Onah [2012]; Molefe [2015b])

Although the concept of *imitatio dei* is of course present in the three Abrahamic faiths, given differences between them and Traditional African Religion about God's nature (as per the second section), there are naturally differences about what it would mean to realize what is divine in oneself. For many adherents to Traditional African Religion, one should adopt a basic aim of fostering vitality, which is normally thought to entail core obligations to procreate and to work hard for one's extended family (e.g., Dzobo [1992b, 225–27]). Even upon the death of one's body, the purpose of promoting the liveliness of others on earth is considered to remain central to one's life, as considered in the following section.

4. WHERE THE AFTERLIFE IS

Suppose for the sake of argument that we survive the death of our body, which is common ground among Traditional African Religion and the Abrahamic faiths (at least if we consider Judaism after the spread of Christianity). *Where* do we continue to exist? Standard forms of the two broad kinds of monotheism interestingly offer divergent answers to this question, which has implications for the nature of the afterlife.

The Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition maintains that we persist because we have a soul, i.e., an immortal, spiritual substance that contains our mental states, and, furthermore, that this soul enters a Heaven or Hell. Our soul is standardly thought to go to a transcendent realm, which could mean elsewhere, i.e., spatially removed from here, or nowhere, beyond space (and perhaps time) altogether.

Of course, Jews tend not to believe in Hell, and some Christians look forward to bodily resurrection on earth. However, the core point is that it is not salient in the Abrahamic tradition to think that one's self never leaves the earth upon one's body having died. A resurrection would be a relocation of some kind back here, and is expected to happen only once the messiah has come.

In contrast, for the African tradition, the afterlife is immanent. When one's body dies, it is thought that one's self remains now-here, i.e., on earth (or, in some rare cases, the sky, on which see [Mbiti \[1975, 116–17\]](#)). Instead of a soul, a spiritual substance, Traditional African Religion posits a life-force, an imperceptible power that constitutes one's self and that outlives the disintegration of one's perceptible form.¹⁰ The self is conceived as an energy that is constituted by relationships with other selves ([Shutte 2001, 21–25](#)), such that it lives on to the extent that it remains in proximate relation to family and other intimates. Those who continue to live on earth with their identities intact but without their original bodies are routinely called the “living-dead” (e.g., [Mbiti 1975, 119](#); [Balogun 2018, 207–23](#)), only a small number of whom count as ancestors, roughly those deemed especially powerful, wise, and beneficent and for that reason to be in closer contact with God than humans and other living-dead.

Consider what is involved in the claim that the hereafter for all persons is “this-worldly” ([Wiredu 1992, 137](#)) or, as one might write, *here-after*:

The living-dead are still “people” They return to their human families from time to time, and share meals with them, however symbolically. They know and have interest in what is going on in the family. . . . [T]hey enquire about family affairs, and may even warn of impending danger or rebuke those who have failed to follow their special instructions. ([Mbiti 1990, 82](#))

And just as the living-dead are thought to engage with us, so many African peoples engage with them, such as by “respecting the departed, giving bits of food to them, pouring out libation and carrying out instructions given by them either while they lived or when they appear” in dreams or visions ([Mbiti 1990, 25](#); see also 81–89, and [Wiredu \[1992, 138–39\]](#); [Ejizu \[2011\]](#)).

Notice how, for Traditional African Religion, the nature of the afterlife is not conceived in terms of a separate spiritual realm of salvation, eternal bliss, the beatific vision, or the like. Instead, it is centrally an earthly life of continued relationship with, even obligation to, intimates. If one asks

in what sense is the African world of the dead an *other* world? the answer must be that it is in no sense another world, but rather a part of this world. . . . The African land of the dead, then, is not heaven in the Christian sense. . . . The one preoccupation of that existence is with the good of the living wing of the family and clan. (Wiredu 1992, 140, 144)

There are two major forms the earthly afterlife, or the “animist” or “enchanted” world (Garuba 2003), is thought to take. On the one hand, a person might be reincarnated. For instance, a person might become reborn in the body of an infant, or, at least in the case of an ancestor, the clan’s totem animal.¹¹ On the other hand, a person might remain disembodied, but still be understood to reside at a specific location. For example, ancestors might be thought to live at a particular place in the countryside, such as a mountain or forest, while many hold that their recently departed loved ones remain living at their graves. Consider the practice of guarding a grave for some time after a funeral, so that no can come to disturb the person, not merely the body (Berglund 1989, 81–82).

These conceptions of the afterlife have occasioned serious conflicts with more western ways of life, with Africans tending to find economic activities such as farming, mining, or killing wild animals for food to be potentially intrusive, and even immoral, for disturbing the living-dead. One court case in South Africa not too long ago was about whether an African long-time resident on land owned by a farmer of European descent could bury her son there against the farmer’s wishes. As she eloquently put it,

[I]t is our custom and religious belief that when a member of our family passes away, he/she gets only physically separated from us but spiritually that person will always be with us and is capable of sharing a day to day life with us though in a different form. It is against this background that a graveyard to us is not only a place to bury our deceased, but a second home for those of us who live in the world of spirits. (Supreme Court of Appeal of South Africa 2001, pgh. 6)

She lost the case,¹² with a Euro-American approach to property rights deemed more important than African burial rites.

Why might one believe the characteristically African-immanent view of the afterlife as opposed to the Abrahamic-transcendent view? Pragmatic considerations loom large, of course. For many, it would be more comforting to think that loved ones are still here and part of the family than to suppose they are in some other, unreachable realm. Traditional African Religionists have also offered evidential reasons for belief in an earthly afterlife. Typical suggestions include that a grandchild exhibits salient features of a long departed grandparent, that people have felt the presence of the

living-dead in dreams and trances, and that the best explanation of harm that has befallen a community is that ancestors are punishing it for obvious misbehavior (Mbiti 1975, 199; Onwuanibe 1984, 190–91; Balogun 2018, 213–14). We do not need to recount to readers of this journal the weighty objections to such arguments.

Instead, we close this section by urging skeptical readers to focus less on belief and more on desire when it comes to where the afterlife is. In the past ten years or so recall that the “protheism” versus “antitheism” debate has arisen in full force, which is not about whether to believe that certain supernatural theses are true, but instead about whether it would be good or desirable if they were true (e.g., Kraay 2018; Metz 2019; Lougheed 2020). The core question has been, “Would a world with (the Abrahamic) God be preferable to an atheist world?” or “Should we want (the Abrahamic) God to exist?” We submit that it would be revealing to pose similar questions about the afterlife. In particular, it is well worth asking, “Would it be better if an afterlife were invariably here on earth or if it were instead in a transcendent realm?” On this score, Traditional African Religion has much to offer—the continuity that it alone posits between this life and the next is *prima facie* attractive in some important respects.

5. HOW LONG THE AFTERLIFE IS

The question of where our selves continue to exist after the deaths of our bodies leaves open the question of how long they persist. Although it is not uncommon to encounter mention of “immortality” in literate expositions of Traditional African Religion, it is normally not meant in the same way as it is used in the Abrahamic faiths. We argue that the prospect of a less than full-blown eternal life that continues after our bodies have returned to dust merits consideration.

For Muslims, Christians, and Jews (at least in the rabbinic period after the appearance of Christianity), eternal life is available. Since we have a soul, a spiritual substance that is indestructible, we cannot die if we are identical to a soul. If we are instead identical to our mental states, then, so long as they remained contained in a soul, we would never die. According to this tradition, we are “immortal” in the sense that we can and do live forever.

In contrast, most talk of “immortality” in the African tradition does not signify a life without any end whatsoever.¹³ For example, Mbiti says, “So long as the living-dead is thus remembered, he is in the state of personal immortality” (Mbiti 1990, 25), without any suggestion that a living-dead person can expect to be remembered into infinity. Instead, the word “immortality” usually suggests an afterlife, but one that is expected to peter out after some time, with talk of four or five generations being salient. The reason for that specification is the view mentioned in the previous section, that the self is thought to be an energy that is (at least partially) constituted by relationships. The longer one’s ties to others persist, the longer one lives. Normally after four or five generations of human beings have passed, a lineage either dies out or it continues but no one remembers the individual in the realm of the living-dead. Either way, human beings are not engaged with him anymore by, say, pouring beer, visiting his grave, or paying attention to his messages. Without the sustaining energy of human beings, the thought is that a member of the living-dead

perishes. As two scholars remark, “Only when he has no further living descendants is he ‘entirely dead’” (Jahn 1961, 109), and “This point is reached when there is no longer anyone alive who remembers them personally by name. Then the process of dying is completed” (Mbiti 1990, 25; see also Menkiti [1984, 174]).

For those adherents to Traditional African Religion who believe that the living-dead eventually die, all agree that this means that the self disintegrates. However, there remains debate about whether something that had sustained the self remains, that is, whether the energy or “spirit” continues to exist without the identity of the person. Might there continue to be something, or perhaps even someone, aptly called an “it” as opposed to “he,” “she,” or a specific name? Mbiti maintains that is the case (Mbiti 1975, 117; 1990, 26, 83), but some prominent commentators have had no truck with the thought that there is any point to discussing what happens upon the death of one’s self. All that matters is that one’s identity is gone forever (Menkiti 1984, 174–75; Ramose 2005, 65–66).

There are probably two logically distinct motivations for the characteristically African view that, even if we can outlive the death of our body, we cannot do so forever. On the one hand, there is a force-based ontology, in accordance with which it is natural to think that energy tends to disintegrate over time, to move from order to disorder. In contrast, a nonphysical substance (a soul) would seem able to exist indefinitely. On the other hand, there is a relational conception of the self, by which the numerical distinctiveness of who one is as a person is a function of one’s interactions with others, which likewise can be expected to change. In contrast, if the self were constituted merely by intrinsic properties, it would be less vulnerable to alteration in the rest of the world. Although traditionally these two views go hand in hand, such that changes to relationship mean changes to life-force (and vice versa), in principle one could accept relationalism without the vitalism (as per Metz [2018]). In any event, the African metaphysics of the self is fluid and does not easily make sense of the prospect of eternal life.

Fascinating cross-cultural debate should take place about how best to conceive what it is that might survive the death of our body and for how long. On the one hand, we submit that the African approach is less metaphysically extravagant and is simpler than the Abrahamic view, the latter of which posits two distinct kinds of substance. On the other hand, adherents to the Abrahamic view will contend that there is no other way one could survive the death of one’s body without a soul, and that if one were able to survive in that manner, then a life without end would be on the cards.

As with the previous issue concerning where the afterlife is lived, we also submit that philosophers of religion ought to address the desirability of the African conception of its length, beyond its credibility. Lately philosophers of religion and value theorists in the Anglo-American tradition have begun questioning whether eternal bliss (or flourishing or meaningfulness) is metaphysically possible for those of us born human. Some have wondered whether we would inevitably get bored if we lived forever, or whether our lives could not avoid repeating themselves in ways that would render them no longer worth living. The suggestion that we could avoid both problems by entering an atemporal realm is unconvincing to many, since our selves are

probably essentially temporal and doing so would amount to suicide. However, it is compelling to maintain that our lives would be more meaningful if there were justice effected in an afterlife, whether that is a matter of good people becoming ancestors or otherwise coming closer to God. Perhaps the African view of the afterlife, or something close to it, can obtain the advantages without the disadvantages: there would be enough time for retributive or compensatory justice to be meted out,¹⁴ and yet not so much time as to drain a life of novelty and growth. Western philosophers of religion should not dismiss this thought.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS ON RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

In this essay we have focused on contrasting beliefs characteristic of Traditional African Religion with those typical of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, our main aim having been to argue that Traditional African Religion is a kind of monotheism that should give adherents to the other faiths pause. We close by briefly noting some differences in religious practices between these religions that naturally follow from the different beliefs.

Most notably, Traditional African Religion is a noninstitutional faith. Nothing akin to a temple, church, or mosque—normally used by people otherwise unknown to one another in a society—is central to indigenous African religious life. Instead, its most important organizing factor is the family unit. It can have larger features, pertaining to the clan or even nation, but these dimensions tend to be more political as they concern the legitimacy of the ruler and future of the group. Traditional African Religion is rather familial in the first instance, as can be readily grasped if one remembers both that much of the religion operates through the medium of interacting with ancestors, i.e., leading members of the living-dead who serve as intermediaries between us and God (section 3), and that ancestors function on the logic of blood-ties. The centrality of ancestors in Traditional African Religion as the principal way to encounter the will of God, and hence at the family level, is crucial.

A second major difference in religious practice, in comparison with at least Christianity and Islam (although admittedly not so much Judaism), is that proselytizing is not on the radar in Traditional African Religion (Abar 2013, 118–19, 122–23). Adherents to the latter do not characteristically seek to convert nonbelievers. The reason is probably that there is no prospect of eternal bliss by becoming a member of the faith or of eternal damnation for failing to do so. The most one can hope for, according to Traditional African Religion, is to become an ancestor, where the only way to become an ancestor is to exhibit a morally upright character that does much to enhance the vitality of the clan.

Although indigenous African peoples have been keen to sustain their cultures and suspicious of those who isolate themselves, most commentators also remark that tolerance is a salient feature of them (e.g., Abar 2013). The lack of an institutionalized religious creed meant to be accepted by all members, the value system predicated on respecting human life and promoting liveliness, and the “low stakes” of disbelieving in Heaven or Hell all probably help to explain the live-and-let-live attitude that is noticeable in respect of African religious matters. Traditional African Religion is, as we have contended, monotheist, but it does not prescribe monoculture.¹⁵

NOTES

1. We note, though, that for all we can tell from a search on JSTOR (jstor.com), this is the first proper work of African philosophy to appear in *The Monist* since its inception in 1888. In 1995 Kwasi Wiredu did publish an article, but not squarely in the field of African philosophy, while in 1906 Arthur Lovejoy devoted a page or two to African religious thought as part of an attempt to capture an element of what he called “primitive” (and, at times, “savage”) cosmology.
2. Despite some qualms about the word “traditional” for suggesting old or even outdated; we would prefer “indigenous.”
3. In addition, we naturally are not seeking to convince atheists and agnostics to change their mind and adopt Traditional African Religion on pain of unreasonableness.
4. For example, we do not critically discuss the prominence of magic and witchcraft in Traditional African Religion (Mbiti 1975, 164–74, 1990, 189–98; Sogolo 1993, 92–103; Magesa 1997, 179–91), or its thesis that the world is ultimately composed of interdependent vital forces that affect one another in the manner of a spider’s web (Ramose 2005; Nkulu-N’Sengha 2009; Imafidon 2013, 38–42).
5. For apparent exceptions, consider the Luo in Kenya, mentioned in Wiredu (2010, 41), and the San in Botswana, mentioned in Onah (2012).
6. For an exception to this approach, see Gyekye (1995, 71, 195).
7. Indeed, in this case the concern is well known for having been raised by the classic Islamic philosopher Avicenna, a minority voice on the topic.
8. Although we realize there are choices to be made if we are going to suggest that the incomprehensibility of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* provides prima facie reason to favor creation *ex materia*.
9. We detect no consensus among African philosophers and theologians on the “Euthyphro problem” regarding whether something is right because God wills it or God wills it because it is right. That said, two of the most influential African philosophers of the past 25 years firmly opt for the latter horn (Wiredu 1992, 144–45; Gyekye 1995, 129–46).
10. In calling life-force “imperceptible,” we mean that it is in principle so. For one, some African thinkers maintain that life-force is in fact perceptible while the person’s body is alive (cf. Berglund 1989, 82–83; Balogun 2018, 180)—consider the distinction one draws between being an “animated body,” as per Genesis, and an “incapsulated spirit” (Abraham 1962, 51). For another, although life-force is imperceptible for most human beings upon the death of the body, diviners are sometimes understood to be able to see or hear it under special conditions (Wiredu 1992, 139).
11. There are puzzles, here, about where an ancestor is if he has been reborn in an infant but is still considered to be in the nonhuman realm of the living-dead, with one “solution” being that an ancestor is merely partially reborn (Onwuanibe 1984, 191–92; Mbiti 1990, 83; cf. Engmann 1992, 176–77; Wiredu 1992, 143).
12. Unfortunately, in not only our view, but also that of South Africa’s Parliament and, eventually, its Supreme Court. In response to the case, the legislature amended an existent act so that an occupier of land may bury another occupier according to his or her religion, if such an established practice exists. The amendment was upheld as not violating the constitutional right to property in *Supreme Court of Appeal of South Africa* (2005).
13. Apparent exceptions are Onwuanibe (1984) and Lugira (2009, 50).
14. Not that it is typical for adherents of Traditional African Religion to think in terms of deserved penalties, let alone Hell or Heaven (see the fourth section above, and also Mbiti [1975, 117] and Wiredu [1992, 143–44]).
15. For comments on a previous draft of this essay, we thank Samuel Lebens and Kirk Lougheed.

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